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Rethinking Conceptions of Borders in the Greater Mekong Subregion: An Interview With Chayan Vaddhanabhuti (RCSD)

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Dr. Chayan Vaddhanabhuti is Director of the Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Thailand. The RCSD was established in 1998 at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, in response to the need for integration of social science and natural science knowledge in order to gain a better understanding of sustainable development in upper Mainland South-East Asia. Chayan Vaddhanabhuti has long been dedicated to the field of social sciences, development issues, and engaged himself extensively with ethnic groups both within Thailand and beyond. In this interview he introduces the work of RCSD and discusses the changing perceptions of the concept of 'border' in the context of Thailand and the Greater Mekong Subregion.



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NAPAKADOL KITTISENEE: We recognise that the 'border' has emerged in the forefront of social sciences as one of the promising themes among scholarly debates. According to the experiences of RCSD, both in terms of academic and activist involvement, what is and how do you make sense of this popular term?

CHAYAN VADDHANABHUTI: I think we have to understand that before Thailand became integrated into the Greater Mekong Subregion in 1995, most Thai scholars tended to carry out their studies within the national boundary. It was an effort to understand our own society - maybe with different perspectives, we can say, the perspectives of the 'insiders' as opposed to the perspectives of the 'outsiders' as studied by scholars from overseas universities. This led to an ignorance of what happened in the neighbouring countries. We did not pay much attention to history, culture, and

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society for example in Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Burma. And again, during that time – during the Cold War – most of the countries in the Mekong Region were undergoing drastic change – they became socialist countries. I think academia has kept itself distanced from those socialist countries. Moreover, socialist countries often did not allow researchers to carry out fieldwork. When we started to develop the Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development in 1998, we thought that it would broaden our understanding if social scientists crossed the border to do research or to learn about those countries which were moving towards development and modernity, linking more with the market economy, like Thailand. Also, we realised that this particular region is geographically and ethnically much related. So, if we would like to understand ourselves in Thai society, we should also study what has happened to Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam as well as Burma. We should understand those neighbouring countries. I believe that we can learn a lot from looking at how, for example, Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian governments deal with issues like resource management, culture, ethnic minorities, or even health and media. We can learn more about these issues and, particularly, we will be able to learn how the history, of both each country and the region, has an impact on Thailand, on the way Thailand tries to position itself, or on the way Thailand has been trying to define its national identity.

NAPAKADOL: It is remarkable that within RCSD's name, two parts or themes are encapsulated: 'Social Science', for the first part, is a category of knowledge or conceptual level while the latter, 'Sustainable Development', deals with practical issues or activism. Is that the proof of the 'border' RCSD has been trying to cross, travelling back and forth between the two sides?

CHAYAN: There are two spaces. First, we put 'Social Science' in the name because we experienced that most of the times when we talked about development, economic, political, or sometimes ecological aspects were emphasised while we did not see the people. People as social actors have not been much recognised in the discourse of development. Our intention is to create a dialogue between Social Science and Non-Social Science or Physical Science by adding social perspectives to the analysis and understanding the issues of development. And second, of course, we value both

‘theory’ and ‘practice’. Theory about the social world comes from training and has to be learned. We think that if we want social science to be powerful, if we want it to be used as a means to understand the world – the social world, we need to emphasise the theoretical part, the theoretical knowledge of the society at large. But, at the same time, we cannot remain in academia or the ivory tower, we should also try to link theories and concepts to practice or the other way around, bringing some practical phenomena and everyday practices into theoretical discussion. We should move back and forth between these two spaces, these two worlds. The border between theoretical understanding and practical enquiry should be crossed back and forth to enrich each other; and we hope that by reflecting upon this kind of relationship, we would be able to come up with an idea on sustainable development.

NAPAKADOL: As some may discern that ‘border’ has been playing important roles in shaping and transforming or even affecting lives of the people in this region, according to RCSD’s experiences, what does ‘border’ mean to this region?

CHAYAN: We have to recognise that this region has been divided into nation states mostly after World War II and, as you know, prior to that in Thailand the border was not conceived of as a static or a concrete border. The borderline was imposed by the colonial powers. Since then, the border has become something that prevented connections between the countries in the region, preventing the movement of people and preventing the movement of goods despite the fact that people, who live in the borderland, share the same culture or a similar ethnic background and also trade with each other. The border has become something like a barrier for those people. So I think it was in 1989, when Prime Minister Chatchai Chunhawan came up with the slogan ‘Turning Battle Fields into Market Places’. This slogan also said something about how the border has become an obstruction for economic co-operation, for the flow of goods, and the movement of people.

NAPAKADOL: Did such a policy affect the areas beyond the Mekong Region, for example Peninsular South-East Asia?

CHAYAN: Even though there was no battlefield in the area of our South, there was the national security concern during the Cold War period. Thailand was very much concerned about the Communist Party of Malaya and also the separatist movement dating back to the 1970s and 1980s in the Deep South of Thailand. Therefore, during that time the border became not only a barrier for communication, interaction, and connectivity among these countries and people living in these areas, but it also reinforced the national identity and nationalism, so people started to feel that they are the people from the North-East of Thailand while other people felt that they are from the Lao PDR despite the fact that they speak the same language, eat the same kind of food, share similar cultural practices, and believe in the same religion, that is Buddhism. In the case of Thailand's Deep South, there was an attempt to separate the *Melayu* Muslims from the Malay people in Malaysia due to security reasons:

NAPAKADOL: Now the border seems to be more open and flexible, especially in the context of gearing up towards ASEAN re-integration in 2015. What do you think about this campaign that promotes a free trade area within the ASEAN countries?

CHAYAN: I think it was in 1995, when the GMS or Greater Mekong Subregion was proposed as a plan to integrate this particular region. We have seen a diminishing role of the border where the respective countries changed their concepts towards national boundaries, allowing people to move across borders. Particularly in response to the expansion of the Thai economy and industry, Thailand's policy has allowed free movement of labourers from Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. The Thai fishing industry, and the agricultural production of certain cash crops like corn, cassava, and sugarcane, all of these activities needed more workers. The same phenomenon of this new interpretation of the 'border' holds true for the expansion of the construction industry where many workers from Thailand's neighbouring countries are employed. We also have to keep in mind, however, that irregular migration and informal labour play an important role. Another important sector for Thailand and the whole region is the international and Asian tourism sector. Thailand attempts to attract more tourists whereas at the same time Thai tourists increasingly cross the border to places like Luang Prabang in Laos, Ha Long Bay in Vietnam, or Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Thus, Thailand tries to open up the border as well as set up many check points along the

Thai border with Laos, Burma, and Cambodia to allow the flow of people and Thai commodities. All of these countries are more or less buyers of Thai commodities, ranging from motorcycles to fish sauce or plastic sheets. Consumers in our neighbouring countries like these products and the value of trade has increased much since the opening of the border.

NAPAKADOL: So let us say not only the border has an impact on our lives but also do our lives define how we look at the border?

CHAYAN: Yes. Opening up the border in this particular region has led to more investment by foreign investors, namely from China, Korea, Singapore, Japan and so forth. Infrastructure has been built to link different regions through so called North-South and East-West corridors in order to facilitate the flows of commodities and people. And more than that, we have observed that in the last almost twenty years, because of the opening of the border, there have been many kinds of investment which have led to the intensification of the use of natural resources. You have heard about dam projects in the Mekong River, rubber plantations in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, or the expansion of corn production by Thai businessmen in Laos, Cambodia, and Burma. All of this leads to a greater exploitation of natural resources. Moreover, we have also observed that there is something what we call extractive economy. There have been attempts to extract more natural resources, namely oil and some minerals, for example Potash. There are plans to set up Potash plants in Udon Thani, Thailand, Bauxite mining in Laos and Cambodia as well as gold and coal mining in Laos and Burma. All of these resources have been exploited in order to support the growing economy, not only within the region but also for countries like China and also Thailand which need more energy and more natural resources for industrial development. So we maybe start to see that what is called 'regional integration' does not bring positive aspects. The economic integration of this region needs to be questioned as it has also led to a non-sustainable use of natural resources. Another issue concerns the increasing flows of cross-border migrant workers. There is a large migrant population in Chiang Mai, Mae Sot, and Ranong. You can find migrant workers in several provinces in Thailand, and they do not come alone but bring with them their children and family. Who is going to be responsible for the education of their

children, who is going to be responsible for their health service? These are questions we need to answer. More than that, there is an issue of human trafficking. There is an increased number of persons who have been trafficked.

NAPAKADOL: You mentioned prior to the interview that you are going to Mae Sot, the borderland between Thailand and Burma, in order to facilitate a project initiated by RCSD under the name of 'Burma Concern'. Can you tell us more about this project?

CHAYAN: When we talk about opening up the border, it means that the border becomes more important. The borderland becomes something we should look at. In Mae Sot, where we have conducted a research project on the issue of displaced persons, these displaced persons came here after the election in Burma in November 2010. It was estimated that at the beginning there were about 22,000 persons staying along the border but now this number is reduced to 10,000 persons. These displaced persons are hiding because they might be sent back or pushed back to Burma by Thai authorities. We also know that even though there is a civilian government in Burma now and many groups of people are trying to promote what is called 'reconciliation', the fighting is still going on along the border. Many parts of the borderland on the Burmese side are mined. You can find landmines in these areas, so the displaced people cannot go back to their home villages as they are afraid of landmines.

NAPAKADOL: During your work in the last decades, you might have seen other cases of displacement, migration, and refugee issues. There was also a case of Cambodian refugees along the Thai border thirty years ago. How is it different from what is currently going on at the Thai-Burma border?

CHAYAN: The situation along the Burma-Thai border is rather different from the Khmer refugee issues thirty years ago. At the borderland of Mae Sot, we have observed that there are three layers of activities or phenomena. First, people living along the borderland are connected. They cross the border visiting each other very often, they belong to the same ethnic group, only a small river separates them. In everyday life, they benefit from collecting forest products, vegetables and growing rice at the borderland. Some of the Thai Karen people go to the Burmese side to grow rice. Some of

Burmese Karen people come to the Thai side to buy goods or to work for Thai farmers and Thai landowners. That is one layer of the phenomenon. Another is the political layer: This area was formerly controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU). Today, it is not the KNU anymore but the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKPA), so the area has been controlled by Karen armed forces for a long time. These groups are fighting with each other and with the Burmese groups or the Burmese State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The lives of the people are constantly in danger because they do not know when the fighting is going to break out and they do not know where the landmines are. On top of this, you can see the borderland which becomes expanded agricultural area owned by mostly Thai businessmen growing corn and so forth. You will see that these three layers are going on all the time, making life there quite dynamic as well as sometimes dangerous if you do not know how to avoid the fights between the two armed groups. So the borderland area has become contested, not only among the armed groups but also among business people who want to invest in the production of corn and cassava and at the same time want to make use of cheap labour from Burma. I do not know much about the situation along Thai-Khmer border thirty years ago, but I suppose there was not be much economic activity there. Was there any?

NAPAKADOL: There was some.

CHAYAN: But was it illegal?

NAPAKADOL: Yes.

CHAYAN: So the aim of the project in Mae Sot is to understand the complexity in the borderland area as well as to demystify the notion of displacement. If we understand the context, we will see that people whom we call 'refugee' or 'displaced person' are not just the ones who run across the border; they have been in contact with different groups of people, they have participated in cash crop economy or contract farming. I thus hope that this project will help to understand people at the border in a better light.

NAPAKADOL: In a more realistic one?

CHAYAN: Yes, not just simply as those who fled across the border, leaving everything back home, the way they have often been painted by certain organisations.

NAPAKADOL: So let us move further to the South. Since you have mentioned life in danger along the borderland, lives of the people over there also seem to be at risk. What is there about RCSD projects dealing with this issue?

CHAYAN: The situation in the South may be the same. It has often been told that the conflict in southern Thailand is caused by the 'separatist movement' or the 'clash of civilizations', as Samuel Huntington termed it. We thought that if we take another look at the situation in the South, trying to understand everyday practice among the local people, particularly those who are *Melayu* Muslims, depending on natural resources, for example, small fishermen in Patani Bay, rice farmers in the middle zone or farmers who engage with plantations - a kind of what they call 'orchard' in the forest, *Suan Somrom*, or *Suan Duzong* meaning mixed garden, then we may have a better understanding of how the lives of people in the Deep South have been affected by the imposed development scheme of the central government. My hypothesis is that people in the Deep South have not only been looked at as the 'Muslim other', but their lives have more or less been shaped by a development policy which neither derived from the local need, nor from the understanding of their culture, or raised as a result of the problems they had. The development projects have been designed by the central Thai government, and then subsequently assigned to the government officers who do not understand their context, culture, and ecology. Most of the development projects tend to fail. So our project there is called 'Kampong Research Project', which means that the research project is done for the village community of the *Melayu* Muslim people and through participation by the local people.

NAPAKADOL: As you address the term 'Kampong', referring to the village community in the Deep South of Thailand, this term can not only be found in southern Thailand but is also prevailing in the Malay World, which does not only mean Malaysia, but also Indonesia, for example. So what happened when the borderline was imposed on

the southern Thai borderland? Did it cut off the connection among the Malay people?

CHAYAN: I think the border in the Deep South seems to be much more porous than in the other parts. Maybe it is similar to the Burma-Thai border because of what we call 'ethnic integration' or 'ethnic linkages' – ethnic ties among the *Melayu* Muslims in the southern part of Thailand and their Malaysian counterparts. There has been a long relationship through economic activities. For example, people in the southern part of Thailand, when they need to get some amount of money they go to work in Malaysia. Since they speak the language, they can seek employment over there, particularly working at Thai restaurants, working in rice cultivation or rice harvest. They become wage labourers and during the religious ceremonies such as Ramadan, we can find people travelling back and forth across the border. So they have a lot of connections and activities going on. These are everyday life practices among the local people.

NAPAKADOL: Last but not least, we have just recently heard through media and academic writings about the slogan: 'The World without Border' or 'The Borderless World'. Plus, these campaigns come in the same fashion as the promotion of the idea of 'ASEAN+3' which means the much more solid integration and co-operation among most South-East Asian countries plus China, Japan, and Korea. You made an observation earlier regarding the regional integration, but within this particular context, what do you think about these campaigns?

CHAYAN: I would not say that we have a 'borderless world' but there will be something what we call 'new regulations'. We still have borders but with new mechanisms allowing the flow of people, commodities, and information to cross borders. Of course, this is a part of what we understand as 'Globalisation'. For some of us, we look at this as 'Neoliberalism', to loosen up the border, allowing more connections between people and nations. My observation is that we seem to have the illusion of the positive side of economic integration without understanding that we are dealing with unlimited flows of investment, and new forms of capitalism. And I would like to emphasise that when we talk about the capitalist development in this particular region, it is not something like the 'free market' as Adam Smith argued. It is capital-

ism which allows - depending on or making use of several forms of politics - different forms of informality and different types of mechanisms which can facilitate capital. You can have corruption as a part of capitalism. You can have a group of people who can monopolise natural resources and at the same time they can displace people from the land they have subsisted on. Because of capitalism you can exploit 'cheap labour' from the neighbouring countries. You can build up new dams so that you can have more energy to support industry or even the rapid train that China is proposing. We will see the economic integration for what? Such a kind of capitalism may not benefit a large number of people, such a kind of capitalism allows certain groups of people to reap the benefit from this neoliberal market but at the same time exploit natural resources, labourers, and especially women and children. So I am very concerned and quite sceptical about what is called ASEAN economic community, which will happen in the year 2015, because when they talk about ASEAN economic community they do not talk about inequality. ASEAN economy is not going to eradicate poverty, on the contrary: It will make a group of people richer whereas other people have to be sacrificed.

NAPAKADOL: My home town is in Nong Khai, a Thai-Lao border province, that has recently been looked at as a new channel or opportunity for economic activities after a long period of 'sleeping border' since Laos became a socialist country and the border got strictly controlled. The local people now have been informed that in post-ASEAN 2015 they will have the golden age of border trade again. Now we have seen more investments there, for example, China has pushed huge economic activities in Laos plus several proposed 'development' plans for the near future. There is a saying that Nong Khai border will be 'boiling up' with commerce. Some people may regard this as the chance for the periphery to become the centre. Do you think the 'border' could become the 'centre' both in terms of economy and politics?

CHAYAN: I am not sure whether I understand the term 'centre' here properly but I would say the social scientists and scholars should pay more attention to borderlands because this is where the intersection of market, culture, and people happens. Also, the border is more or less the peripheral area of the country, so not many people are interested in looking at borderlands closely. Many things can happen, as

I said, the interaction between legal and illegal activities, between armed groups, between people from different cultures and from different ethnic backgrounds. It has to be the 'centre' of our attention, and the centre of studies in the next decade since it has been left out for a long time, so centre in that sense. And you may have heard that there are trends that have been coined as 'Economic Zone at the Border' like in Trat province...

NAPAKADOL: Yes, connected to Cambodia...

CHAYAN: Trat province now becomes what is called 'CP Empire' creating big investments there such as shrimp farming, meaning that the mangrove forest there will be destroyed or that some parts of it have already been destroyed. The new airport is being built by Bangkok Airways to host the tourists before going to Koh Chang. Mae Sai is also *the* economic zone at the border as well as Tavoy in Burma. So not only from an academic perspective but also from economic, cultural, and political aspects you can realize that borderlands become increasingly important as the arena for contestation, investment, and exploitation.

NAPAKADOL: Thank you very much for your time.